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The Mediatisation of Experience in Historical Perspective: From the Theatres of the 1800s to the Cinemas of the 20th Century

José Ricardo Carvalheiro

Departamento de Comunicação, Filosofia e Política, Faculdade de Artes e Letras, Universidade da Beira Interior, Covilhã, Portugal

Abstract

Mediatisation, a prominent concept in contemporary communication studies, is addressed in this article as a diachronic process warranting historical investigation. The focus is on the experiences of theatre and cinema audiences from the mid-19th century to the early decades of the 20th century. The study examines historical transformations in these mediated experiences through an analysis of literary works and contemporary press publications. Some evolutionary trends are identified, revealing significant, consistent patterns in the ways audience experiences of theatre and cinema have been transformed. This evolution is positioned within a long-term process of mediatisation, shaped less by the introduction of film and the technological innovations of cinema as a medium and more by changes in the sociocultural contexts and norms redefining audience practices in theatres. The article argues that the epistemological value of the concept of "mediatisation" relies on its integration with the notion of "mediation" and a symbolic understanding of experience. It challenges the adequacy of perspectives that prioritise technological change as the primary lens for understanding critical media transformations in modernity.

Keywords
mediatisation, mediated experience, theatre, cinema, history

A Mediatização da Experiência em Perspetiva Histórica: Dos Teatros de Oitocentos aos Cinemas do Século XX

Resumo

Hoje proeminente nos estudos de comunicação, a mediatização é abordada neste artigo como um processo diacrónico merecedor de investigação histórica, aqui dirigida a aspetos da experiência do público de teatro e cinema num período que se situa entre meados do século XIX e as primeiras décadas do século XX. As transformações históricas na experiência mediada desses públicos são exploradas com base em obras literárias e órgãos da imprensa coeva. Identifica-se algumas tendências evolutivas que levam a realçar continuidades significativas na forma como se vai transformando a experiência da assistência nos espetáculos teatrais e cinematográficos. Esta evolução faz parte de um processo de mediatização no longo prazo cujos principais contornos não se devem tanto à introdução do filme e à inovação tecnológica do cinema como média, e mais a mudanças nos contextos e normas socioculturais que vão reenquadrando a audiência nas salas de espetáculos. Considera-se que o valor epistemológico do conceito de "mediatização" depende, para este objeto, de se articular com a noção de "mediação" e de uma conceção simbólica da experiência, e contesta-se que usá-lo como lente essencialmente voltada para as

mudanças tecnológicas seja capaz de captar convenientemente algumas transformações cruciais que envolvem os média na modernidade.

Palavras-chave
mediatização, experiência mediada, teatro, cinema, história

1. Introduction

The centrality of communication technologies in contemporary life has driven the development of mediatisation theories, which centre on the interplay between transformations in media and society. This article focuses particularly on changes in experience, understood as the ways individuals relate to and engage with the world. It aims to examine *reception as a form of experience*, exploring how audience practices reflect transformations historically linked to processes of mediatisation.

However, the vicissitudes of historical reception studies are well known, as the empirical material largely pertains to everyday life, with research facing the challenge of a wide dispersion of sources and fragmentary testimonies. As an alternative, we have chosen to use literature as our starting point, drawing on references from a collection of memoirs and autobiographies by writers and artists, complemented by novels from the same period. Dispersion and intermittency were thus embraced as methodological tools in the long process of identifying references related to mediated experience. The literary texts are not viewed as a *corpus* that, in the classical sense, could map the general structure of mediated experiences in a particular era. Rather, we regard them as a means of identifying relevant aspects that can then be explored through other sources, both primary (such as press and other contemporary materials) and secondary (including previous research). This approach is applied to the process involving theatre and cinema between the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

Before adopting the empirical approach, we examine the concepts of "mediatisation", "mediation", and "experience", with the aim of articulating them from a historical perspective.

2. Mediatisation Theory

The concept of "mediatisation" introduces a diachronic perspective to the notion of "mediation", but most approaches tend to focus on the present. In some cases, a form of diachronism is abstracted from history (Stromback, 2008). In others, the historical dimension is inherently tied to mediatisation, and this involves certain premises that we will now explain.

The first premise suggests that a cascade of quantitative changes leads to the growing presence of the media in society (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Schulz, 2004). This intensification is emphasised, generally beginning with the reproducibility introduced by the

press, followed by the massification brought about by large-scale organisations, and culminating in the ubiquitous use of mobile devices.

A second premise is that the process involves qualitative transformations. These have been explored through two epistemological approaches in this field of study: an institutional approach, which examines how communicative mediations influence the organisation and functioning of other fields, and a constructivist approach, which focuses on how meaning is constructed in everyday life. Changes can be conceptualised broadly — in communicative patterns (Lundby, 2014), in worldviews (Hepp & Krotz, 2014), and in the social construction of reality (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) — or examined in specific domains, ranging from religion to sport.

In these cases, the diachronic perspective is embedded in the concept itself: mediatisation is defined as "a category to describe a process of change" (Hepp & Krotz, 2014, p. 3) or "a distinctive type of approach to contemporary transformations" (Couldry, 2014, p. 34). It thus situates the media within a processual and dynamic social framework, urging us to position them within specific historical moments.

Thus, this standpoint engages the media in societal transformations more broadly than other approaches that focus on change, such as medium theory, which tends to concentrate on individual forms of communication in isolation. Mediatisation, in contrast, is a process shaped by the accumulation and interaction of various media — both old and new — forming a kind of geological strata in which some settle, others emerge, and some fade away. Social transformations occur within the framework of the relationship between individuals and institutions, as well as the specific set of media present in a given context, each with varying degrees of relevance.

However, the theoretical bias towards change can obscure processes of continuity, reproduction, or reinforcement of existing phenomena, which may also occur alongside the increased media presence. Defining mediatisation exclusively in terms of transformation risks overlooking some of the historical dynamics tied to media intensification, particularly when these trends contribute to social stabilisation.

On the other hand, the historical perspective is rarely discussed in depth (Bollin, 2014), and the notion of time is inconsistently applied by researchers. Some view mediatisation as a contemporary phenomenon (Hjavard, 2014), while others see it as an anthropological movement present throughout human history (Bourdon & Balbi, 2021; Krotz, 2017). Some scholars identify moments of rupture or revolution (Lundby, 2014), whereas others perceive it as a more or less continuous evolutionary process, albeit with periods of greater acceleration (Fornas, 2014; Verón, 2014).

Some scholars respond to the question of when mediatisation began (Kortti, 2017; Lundby, 2014) with a historical periodisation. Couldry and Hepp (2017) identify a five-century process that started with the printing press, unfolding in three waves: mechanisation, electrification, and digitalisation. Garcia and Subtil's (2022) periodisation follows a similar structure but includes four phases: the third centred on electronics, telecommunications, and audiovisual media, and the fourth marked by their convergence with computing, culminating in digitalisation. Other scholars propose broader historical

frameworks, such as Kortti (2017), who traces mediatisation back to pre-modern times, highlighting the role of religious imagery. Fornas (2014) rejects the notion that mediatisation is limited to recent periods and questions whether a clear historical line can be drawn between a pre-mediated and a post-mediated world. Bourdon and Balbi (2021) criticise "short-termism", arguing that many studies mistakenly place the beginning of mediatisation only with the rise of electronic media in the 20th century.

On the other hand, several theorists have sought to move beyond the prism of (historical) media effects, aiming to distance themselves from causal linearity. The call for a simultaneous analysis of transformations in both the media and society, as well as the concept of mediatisation as a "meta-process" (Krotz, 2017) interconnected with other significant processes — such as modernisation, commercialisation, and globalisation — forms part of this epistemological endeavour to avoid treating media changes as the sole cause of different transformations.

These dialectical assertions often end up inadvertently slipping into media causality. The aim is expressed as to "analyse critically the interrelation between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other", yet shortly after, it is stated that mediatisation corresponds to "the processes of transformation and change across society *that result* [emphasis added] from mediation" (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 35). While it is argued that mediatisation "is not just about the media" but rather about "sociocultural transformations *related* [emphasis added] to such media-based communication", it concludes by stating that it is "the transforming potential of mediated communication *upon* [emphasis added] culture and society" (Lundby, 2014, pp. 33, 40–41).

Attributing causality to the media *over* other factors means viewing them solely as agents of change. Establishing relationships *between* factors, on the other hand, views the media as one component of broader changes. In historical approaches, a one-sided view of media causality undermines the understanding of the media as products of historical processes themselves. Mediatisation can occur not because the media are the starting point or main drivers but because other contextual factors lead to an increase in media presence and particular characteristics, thereby involving the media in wider sociocultural transformations.

The media-centric focus in mediatisation research also impacts the relationship between mediated and direct communication. Early references to mediatisation, such as those by Ernst Mannheim a century ago, emphasised that it did not replace interpersonal communication but rather reshaped it (Averbeck-Lietz, 2014). We can also discuss the blending of mediated and non-mediated activities or terms like "extension" or "accommodation" (Schulz, 2004). However, the media-focused perspective is so dominant that some scholars have pointed out that "it is a fallacy to identify communication with media communication" (Garcia & Subtil, 2022, p. 237) and argue that the concept of "mediatisation" loses its significance if it fails to consider the relationships between media and non-media phenomena (Verón, 2014).

It is, therefore, crucial not to overlook the concept of "mediation" as complementary to that of mediatisation. In communication studies, a narrow definition of mediation

prevails, typically referring to the use of socially institutionalised technical means, most commonly the mass media (Averbeck-Lietz, 2014; Fornas, 2014; Hjavard, 2014). However, it can be understood more broadly as all "technologically based means that extend or modify our human basic possibilities of communication" (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 32). Additionally, there are various interpretations of technology, sometimes seen as synonymous with modern devices but more broadly encompassing even ancient forms of technical mediation, from clay tablets to handwritten pamphlets.

A broad understanding of mediation encompasses the natural mechanisms of human communication, as "meanings cannot be transmitted directly from mind to mind" and always require "vehicles" such as voice or gesture (Lundby, 2014, pp. 32–33). Furthermore, it includes mediation through language, a key aspect from a symbolic perspective in which signs are the mediators, enabling humans to apprehend their surroundings (Cassirer, 1997).

Thus, there are technical and non-technical mediations, both natural and cultural. In this article, we focus on the trans-historical concept of technical media due to their significance as key communication devices across different spaces and times. However, we acknowledge that other levels of mediation remain prominent in human activity, even if often overlooked through modernist perspectives. We argue that the *process* of mediatisation involves the intensification of technical means of communication, but the *study* of mediatisation requires considering the entire spectrum of mediations.

Hence, we believe that studying mediatisation entails exploring the historical role of various forms of mediation (including those in the broader sense). This approach moves beyond traditional "media history", which is often considered intrinsic to the media themselves. The theory of mediatisation, in its dialectical and historicist form, enables us to connect the media more deeply with the social dynamics of each era.

3. Mediatisation of Experience

What we aim to explore with the concept of "experience" is how the relationship between individuals and the world is historically restructured across its different spaces and times: the here and now, on the one hand, and the distant or deferred, on the other. By considering the recomposition of these levels of experience in conjunction with mediatisation processes, we expand our understanding of human universes. However, our focus is not on the interpretation of specific content by audiences but rather on the characteristics of the experience within the context of reception.

Sociologists who specialise in communication have also offered reflections on the concept of "experience". A classic definition provided by Norbert Elias (1989/1994) refers to experience as that which is personally lived through sensory impressions. What is received through communication, in turn, is regarded as knowledge about the experiences of others, which are presented "in a symbolic form" (Elias, 1989/1994, p. 92). However, Elias (1989/1994) takes this further by suggesting that the individual who acquires this knowledge gains "symbolised experiences" (p. 129). It remains unclear,

however, whether he is referring to the experiences of others (which are communicated to him) or his own (which he realises upon encountering the symbolic material).

To elaborate further, Anthony Giddens (1991/2001) contends that media reception also carries the character of an experience. Giddens uses the term "mediated experience" to describe remote events that "might be experienced by the individual" (p. 24) and argues that modern media have led to a "tremendous increase in the mediation of experience" (p. 22). Suggesting a theory of mediatisation, even though he does not explicitly use the term.

The dichotomisation of types of experience dates back at least to the 1920s in the context of the sociology of the press in Germany, where the distinction between indirect or secondary experience and the direct or primary experience of face-to-face contact was crucial for interwar scholars such as Otto Groth and Ernst Mannheim (Averbeck-Lietz, 2014).

Recently, John Thompson (1995), drawing on Giddens' terminology, has contributed significantly to the sociological exploration of the dichotomy between direct (or "personal") experience and mediated experience. In modern times, individuals' ability to experience the world is no longer necessarily tied to direct encounters, and mediated experience has proliferated (Thompson, 1995). This has led to a complex reordering, where different forms of experience intertwine and merge. On the other hand, the growth of "sequestration" of experiences (such as death) by specialised institutions separates them from the everyday life directly experienced by most people. However, these experiences "are reintroduced—perhaps even amplified and accentuated—through the media" (Thompson, 1995, p. 227). For individuals, mediated experience is discontinuous and filtered through the self's structures of relevance, while "lived experience" consists of what occurs in the same space-time as the individual in a continuous, everyday manner.

Another sociologist who connects experience and communication is Adriano Duarte Rodrigues (1999). In his multivalent conception of experience, the author identifies two types of mediating devices between individuals and the world: natural and artificial. This approach first adopts a broad definition of mediation, beginning with the sensory organs, which serve as the natural interface with the external world. Secondly, Rodrigues argues that artificial devices, "invented by successive generations" (p. 7), include not only those of the technical domain but also cultural mediations, such as language, whose internalisation is essential for individuals to "respond" to the world.

Before these authors, the social theory that has most extensively explored the notion of "experience" is the phenomenological tradition. In Alfred Schutz's (1970/1979) framework, the experiential process encompasses both the individual's perceptions and reflections as they engage with the world, forming a continuous and uninterrupted flow. This process has two dimensions: the experience of the external world, or the objects of experience, and the experience of inner perception, or "subjective" experience. Phenomenological inquiry seeks to uncover these "acts of subjective experience", which individuals often overlook in daily life as they focus on the objects of experience.

Schutz also dichotomises experience into direct and indirect (or "mediated"). The experience of the "vivid present" is based on co-presence. As one moves to indirect situations, there is a loss of vividness, marked by a "decreasing relevance" reflected in fewer

perceptions (Schutz, 1970/1979, pp. 213–214). This dichotomy differs from the distinction between technical and non-technical mediations, as Schutz does not limit "mediated" experience to the use of technological devices. It encompasses telephone conversations, letter exchanges, and messages relayed by a third person. Relationships with what he refers to as "mere contemporaries" or "predecessors" may be mediated either technically or through others, and while they are not directly experienced, they involve "impersonal" knowledge, thus forming part of (indirect) experience.

While Schutz's emphasis on the ontological priority of face-to-face interactions and his reluctance to attribute the same depth to mediated experiences may cause harmful prejudices against the approach to mediatisation, his focus on traditional mediation reminds us that human experience still depends on long-established and varied means of transcending the here and now.

We adopt this perspective, grounding it in the notion that the symbolic universe is an inescapable dimension of human existence. Alongside sensory perception of the world, an intricate web of humanly constructed symbolic forms is woven into human experience. If we embrace Cassirer's anthropological philosophy (1944/1995), this means that "one can no longer immediately confront reality" (p. 33). This view of the human being as a "symbolic animal" suggests that no experience is truly direct. However, we will set that discussion aside and focus on what is pertinent here, despite its apparent obviousness: symbols not only serve as expressions of subjects, but they also function as "designators" of objects (Cassirer, 1944/1995, p. 38). Through symbolic forms — which, in Cassirer's expansive understanding (1997), encompass everything from language to religious and scientific systems — what is past or distant in space can be *made present*. It is this notion of mediation as a means of connecting with deferred space/times that is essential for exploring the mediatisation of experience.

These processes of *making present* constitute the indirect modalities of experience, whether or not they involve technical means. Walter Benjamin's (1936/2012) reflection on oral narration is well-known, as he highlights how what is recounted from someone's own experience can be transformed into the experience of those who hear the story. That represents one of the clearest examples of mediation processes, which, being inherently human, have existed since ancient times as ways of transcending the immediate. This is also why Schutz (1970/1979) suggests memory itself functions as a form of "mediation" for past personal experiences, re-experienced under certain circumstances, indirectly, and with new dimensions. Similarly, Bourdon and Balbi (2021) remind us of the existence of traditional practices — from religious rituals to theatre and other artistic forms — that can provide distanced experiences no less vivid than those offered by modern forms of mediatisation, and sometimes even more intense than the immediate experience itself.

These practices correspond to traditional forms of symbolic mediation, which can also be transposed across different spaces and times. The assumption that, in traditional societies, individuals' experiences were confined to the here and now reflects a "modernist" prejudice (Bourdon & Balbi, 2021). Moreover, certain theories of mediatisation, in their narrow view of the technological as electronic and digital, tend to downplay

non-modern technical forms, such as letters, which have historically played a crucial role in facilitating distanced experiences (Bourdon & Balbi, 2021).

The relevance of mediatisation can be seen in its role within a broad context where it not only coexists with direct experience but where other processes of symbolic mediation also persist, transform, or fade away as forms of distanced experience with the progression of modernity. For Benjamin (1936/2012), the transmission of experience through orality relies on the art of storytelling and listening — an ability that the author saw disintegrating alongside the decline of old trades and the communities of listeners, a process that coincided with the rise of the novel and the press.

The analysis of how experience transforms as modern media develops and becomes institutionalised is presented in Thompson's (1995) work. Thompson begins with a broad concept of "symbolic forms", considering them as fundamental to social life since the most basic forms of human language. However, the presence and structure of these forms change when relatively fleeting symbolic contents, like those found in conversation, acquire material substrates that enable their fixation, longevity, reproduction, and circulation. According to Thompson, the transformations that modernity brings to human experience are characterised by the extensive growth of these mediations and by the "desequestration" of experience — its liberation from the constraints of space and time through symbolic forms that represent distant events.

Focusing on scalping the consequences of modern media on experience, Thompson begins by addressing these and opting for a clear approach to conceptualising the issue: he establishes a binary distinction between mediated experience and direct experience, with mediated experience defined as that which is mediated through technical means of communication.

We contend, however, that excluding from the concept of "mediated experience" everything that does not involve the media is not the most effective approach to understanding the relationship between experience and various space-times, nor the subtleties of the mediatisation process. The ways in which experience is liberated from the immediate extend beyond the binary distinction between the presence or absence of media and the dichotomy between technical and non-technical mediations. Instead, they involve the interplay through which the formation of a "non-sequestered" experience incorporates elements of both. The mediatisation of experience reflects this historical process, wherein each era uniquely combines traditional mediations with emerging media, progressively amplifying the role of the latter.

This is why we argue that the concept of "mediation", in relation to individuals' experiences beyond the here and now, pertains to a broad symbolic sphere encompassing both mediatisation processes (mediations involving technical means) and non-mediated modes of mediation.

Furthermore, understanding the duality between direct and mediated experience requires distinguishing the communicational plane from the experiential plane, as the dichotomy takes on different meanings in each context. Communicative interactions can be easily dichotomised: they are direct when two or more agents share the same

space-time; they are mediated when the entities involved do not share the same space and/or time, but communication is facilitated through technical means. In communicative acts, mediation refers to the use of media, whether modern and sophisticated or ancient and rudimentary.

Experience is not so easily divisible. While direct experience refers to what we undergo personally and synchronously, mediated experience, which enables symbolic connection to something distant, is inherently two-dimensional (whether it involves technical mediation or is solely human). The cinema, newspaper reading, or listening to a story in a group of listeners all offer dimensions of immediate experience, each with its own unique sensory and situational roles. The content of these mediations, however, belongs to a symbolic dimension that transcends the here and now. Figure 1 illustrates this concept.

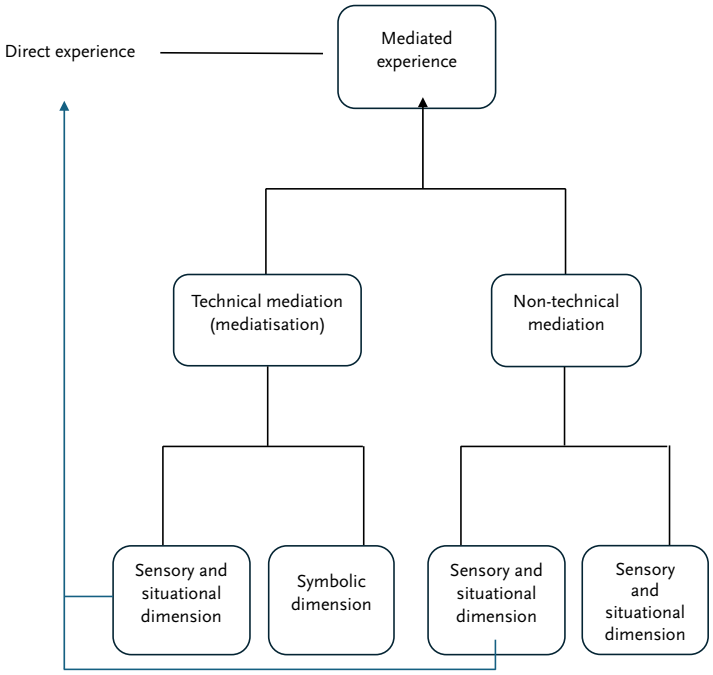

Figure 1. *Levels involved in the experience of non-present universes*

Symbolic forms create a spiritual energy through which meanings arise from tangible and concrete signs (Cassirer, 1997). That is why the most significant mediated experiences for individuals are those in which they feel symbolically "transported" beyond the here and now. Benjamin (1936/2012) argues that narrated experience alone is insufficient to become the listener's experience, as it is not inherently embedded within the narrative but occurs through the listener's active imagination. In this sense, experience is not something that is merely transmitted but rather something that is (re)created by the recipient. This process is, however, influenced by the immediate dimension of the reception experience. In the case of oral narration, it requires a conducive social environment and a mental state "of relaxation, which is increasingly rare" in modern times.

Mediated experience must also encompass those symbolic forms that transcend the real world, challenging the modernist perspective that prioritises access to distant events

while sidelining the vast repertoire of fantasy, a legacy of humanity that entered mediatisation processes millennia ago and proliferated industrially in modernity (Bourdon & Balbi, 2021). These experiential objects, which cannot be perceived immediately due to their nonexistence in the real world (such as the god Jupiter, Anna Karenina, or hobbits), nonetheless possess effective representations. They form part of experience as entities that can be meaningfully thought about and discussed, enabling individuals to transcend the here and now.

4. Mediatisation in the History of Theatre and Cinema

Viewed through the most common lens, the emergence of cinema, which eclipsed theatre as the leading public spectacle in the 1910s and 1920s, represents a clear mediatising shift. This transition marks a rupture between live performance and the projection of moving images: while theatre presents only the present, cinema offers access to the distant, introducing a novel form of mediated experience. The significant focus of early cinematic production on documentary films, including "views", "naturals", and "newsreels", reinforced the perception of cinema as a means of accessing real-world places and events. This was evident from the first public screening in Portugal in 1896 when the Real Colyseu de Lisboa presented Parisian scenes of balls and the Pont Neuf (Pina, 1986). Just as in later decades — among countless examples — audiences in Viseu watched *Ascensão ao Monte Branco* (Ascension on Monte Branco; *O Cinema*, January 1, 1919, p. 2), and viewers in Ponta Delgada experienced *Peregrinação Portuguesa a Lourdes e Roma* (Portuguese Pilgrimage to Lourdes and Rome; *Cinema*, January 3, 1929, p. 3). The cinema press frequently highlighted the medium's ability to transport audiences across vast distances:

> the white cloth, like a train window or a ship's rail, (...) lets us glimpse the extravagance of their original existences, introducing us to the strangest and most distant peoples. The Himalayas' mountains, China's reeds, Africa's hinterlands, and Norway's fjords (...), we partake in the most marvellous journeys. (*O Cinema do Operário*, November 21, 1931, p. 38)

Conversely, if mediatisation is primarily defined by the expansion of media forms, the rapid mass adoption of cinema strongly supports this notion. The first cinema in Lisbon opened in 1904; by 1912, the number had grown to 17, and by 1932, it had reached 31, with monthly ticket sales equating to half the city's population (Baptista, 2007). During the 1920s, the press marvelled at international statistics: 2,200 cinemas in Italy, 3,700 in Germany, and 18,000 in the United States (*O Cinêma*, March, 1921, p. 2). This mediatising drive is further reflected in the construction of grand "dream palaces" designed to accommodate hundreds of spectators (Briggs & Burke, 2009).

For these reasons, cinema is often included alongside the press, radio, and television in accounts of the great mass media of the 20th century. Within the historical process of mediatisation, the emergence of cinema represents a distinct episode in the broader phase of "electrification" (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), which unfolded across the 19th and 20th

centuries. Cinema distinguished itself from theatre as a form of spectacle through its unprecedented technological capacity to mediate the audience's experience on a mass scale.

However, if we shift our epistemological perspective, we can discern different types of transformations that define this process of mediatisation.

A broader conception of mediation readily encompasses the staging of a story in theatre as a symbolic form, enabling the audience to experience something that transcends the immediate space and time. This notion is echoed in various literary works. In *As Confissões de Felix Krull* (Confessions of Felix Krull), the most autobiographical work by Thomas Mann (1875–1955), the young protagonist, a son of the German industrial bourgeoisie, makes his debut by attending a theatre where he watches an operetta set in Paris:

> never before except in church had I seen so many people gathered together in a large and stately auditorium; and this theatre with its impressive seating arrangements and its elevated stage where privileged personages, brilliantly costumed and accompanied by music, went through their dialogues and dances, (...) all this was in my eyes a temple of pleasure, where men in need of edification gathered in darkness and gazed upward open-mouthed into a realm of brightness and perfection where they beheld their heart's desire. (Mann, 1954/2003, p. 32)

This theatrical context, which Mann situates at the end of the 19th century, materialises a crucial transformation in the structure of mediations of dramatic spectacles. This transformation, which would later characterise cinema in the 20th century, predates cinema and is defined by the intensification of the symbolic dimension, where "in need of edification", spectators "gathered in darkness".

One of the points at issue is what is *shown* in theatres. Traditionally, theatres kept their large chandeliers illuminated during performances, lighting the entire venue while the stage remained merely a gradation zone within the overall brightness. The introduction of gas lighting in the early 1800s did not initially alter this practice. However, from the mid-19th century onwards, some theatres began dimming or intermittently switching off the lights during certain scenes — a technique made possible by the gas system (Rees, 1978). This approach aligned with the logic behind the invention of spotlights — also introduced in the mid-century — which aimed to accentuate specific areas of the stage, enhancing actors and scenes through visual effects.

However, the intention of some entrepreneurs and directors to darken the auditorium met resistance from audiences rooted in the festive atmosphere and sociability that had characterised the theatre for centuries. Both the aristocratic tradition — shaped by a lack of deference towards artists (stemming from court contexts where they were viewed as subordinates) — and the popular tradition, marked by turbulent and irreverent interaction (derived from street performances and a carnival spirit), were defined by the audience's only occasional focus on the stage (Butsch, 2000).

Literary works from the 19th century reflect this dynamic. Victor Hugo (1802–1885) drew inspiration from the popular audiences of his time to vividly portray the inattentive

and defiant crowd at the beginning of *Notre Dame of Paris* (despite the plot being set in the 15th century). Similarly, Leo Tolstoi (1828–1910) offers an extensive depiction of the 19th-century aristocratic audience in *Guerra e Paz* (War and Peace), presenting the opera as primarily an occasion for attendees to see and be seen:

> through the door rows of brightly lit boxes in which ladies sat with bare arms and shoulders, and noisy stalls brilliant with uniforms, glittered before their eyes. (...) Natasha, smoothing her gown, (...) sat down, scanning brilliant tiers of boxes opposite. (...) Hundreds of eyes looking at her bare arms and neck suddenly affected her both agreeably and disagreeably. (Tolstoi, 1869/1973, p. 608)

In the United States, the "sovereignty of the audience" was also fully evident in the first half of the 19th century, with the common public notably exercising their recognised right to criticise and confront artists and managers during performances. They demanded songs of their choice, whistled, shouted, threw objects onto the stage, and even incited riots to assert their will (Butsch, 2000). In Lisbon's theatre on Rua das Trinas, located in the fishermen's and fishwives' neighbourhood of Mocambo. It is noted that "[people] ate and drank during the function, with broad beans, pumpkin seeds, boiled periwinkles, and other delicacies being passed around" (Filipe, 2017, p. 49), while the municipal guard was often called in to manage disputes.

Audience members regarded the performance as just one element of the theatre experience, alongside family and community interactions, collective participation, and performing for one another. Attention shifted freely and fluidly between the scene on stage and other activities.

This activity was increasingly curtailed as the 19th century drew to a close, with theatre audiences becoming predominantly middle-class, adopting bourgeois notions of respectability and decorum. Noisy behaviour was prohibited, chairs were fixed to the floor, and audience actions were restricted — a process culminating in the darkening of theatre halls. When the lights were dimmed, as occurred in 1890 at the Covent Garden Theatre in London amid resistance from long-standing patrons, audience members could no longer see one another. A new dynamic replaced the interaction between the audience and the performers: "the drama now took place in a great pool of light from which the audience sat separated in shadow: they were outside looking in" (Rees, 1978, p. 188).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the biography of the painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) captures his complaints about this transformation, reflecting his perspective as an old theatre-goer:

> it's outrageous to lock people up in the dark for three hours. It's a breach of trust. (...) You're forced to look at a single point of light, the stage. That's tyranny! I might feel like looking at a beautiful woman in a box. (...) For me, the show is as much in the room as it is on stage. The audience is as important as the actors. (Renoir, 1958/2005, p. 159)

The Portuguese playwright and theatre impresario Sousa Bastos (1844–1911) also recommended, at the turn of the 19th century, to "illuminate the theatre with thrift, but without leaving the audience in the dark as some do" (Bastos, 1908, p. 76), reflecting the concerns of a transitional phase. In fact, with the advent of electric lighting, the increasing use of this technique to capture the audience's attention and create dramatic and spectacular effects (Held, 1955) was in harmony with the individualistic *ethos* of the bourgeois audience and the commercial drive to offer consumable experiences.

By quieting and isolating audience members, the new theatrical norm "privatised audience members' experiences, as each experienced the event psychologically alone" (Butsch, 2000, p. 15). This shift accentuated the symbolic dimension of the mediated experience while blurring its situational aspect — a process that also served as a means of social control and the political neutralisation of the common audience, which was denied a collective and participatory space. The new reception context obscured the immediate and encouraged the transposition of spectators into the universes represented, whether distant in time and space or even more fantastical, as the rise of so-called "magical", fantastic, and supernatural plots gained popularity. These elements, combined with the splendour of sets, props, and music, immersed the audience in dazzling spectacularity (Bastos, 1908). This capacity to transfigure and magnetise symbolic forms became a point of emphasis for intellectual critics of undervalued theatrical genres. The newspaper *Illustração Popular* captured this in its description of an act by a beauty from the confines of Algeria during a variety show at the Príncipe Real Theatre in Porto: "the expected moment arrives, and the whole room is extinguished so that only beauty shines. Transformations ensue, beautiful images are projected onto the white canvas, and her sculptural body, haloed in light, appears more like a fantastical vision" (*Illustração Popular*, December 27, 1908, p. 13). However, once the moment passes, the artist returns to the stage and, "now devoid of the shimmering light and the ethereal quality of a dream, thanks the audience like any chorus girl in a lowly theatre".

In the early 20th century, theatre and cinema were often critiqued together. The same periodical grouped the cinematograph, magic shows, and revue theatre, lamenting the dominance of these forms, which were "enticing the public with appeals to their instincts and surrounding them with a musky air of pleasures", thus contributing to the decline of dramatic theatre (*Illustração Popular*, November 1, 1908, p. 8). The term "house of dreams" was employed in 1909 by American sociologist Jane Addams (2004) to describe both theatres that staged mystery and romance plays critically for thousands of young people and the "five-cent theatres", or nickelodeons, where collections of short films were screened.

However, the darkened cinema rooms still did not ensure an exclusive focus on the filmic experience, especially among the common audience, for whom this experience remained participatory. At the start of the new century, the nickelodeons were sometimes "genuine social centres where neighbourhood groups may be found any evening of the week", where "the people chat in a friendly manner, children move freely about the house" (Butsch, 2000, p. 148). The Lisbon chronicles of Carlos Malheiro Dias (1875–1941) also

captured the informal atmosphere in cinematographs, where "the spectator comes and goes at any time, with a hat on his head and a lit cigarette". Yet, these spaces "managed to stir hearts with tragedies lasting just ten minutes" (Dias, n.d., p. 42). The writer José Rodrigues Miguéis (1901–1980) also depicted the small cinemas in Lisbon in his childhood:

> in the cramped shop that once housed a drugstore, the Animatograph's bell rings hesitantly, casting a bluish spark (...). At Easter, The Life of Christ unfolds amidst flashes of lightning, blurred colours, and a bewildering tangle of images (...) a thunderous clatter of cans erupts behind the curtain as Our Lord finally appears nailed to His Cross, flanked by the Good and the Bad Thief. (Miguéis, 1993, p. 110)

The oscillating focus between the performance and the audience appears to have persisted during the era of silent films accompanied by live sound. At the Viriato Theatre in Viseu, one regular observed that "in their boxes, the most elegant and charming scene imaginable unfolds. Graceful and elegant ladies of unusual beauty and cultivated spirit, enough to drive the regulars wild". Yet, the symbolic transportation offered by the films competed with this allure: "because many films screened there possess such sublime plots and landscapes that the audience finds itself genuinely torn in deciding which is more captivating [the film or the beauties in attendance]" (*O Cinema*, January 5, 1919, p. 1).

Even in the theatres built in Lisbon during the 1920s, which were already drawing in middle-class audiences, the film screening "could become a secondary aspect of the session", marked by the spectators' artistic indifference and "their cinephilia reduced to copying the haircuts, make-up, clothing, and poses of actors and actresses" (Baptista, 2007, para. 12). Evidence of an interventionist popular audience persisted into the early 1930s. The newspaper *Voz do Operário* reported that

> in the stalls, there are mostly boys of all ages, lively and boisterous, restless and shouting, quick to whistle and hurl profanities at the operator at the slightest film misalignment, to applaud the struggles of the film's heroes noisily, and to cheer them on. (*O Cinema do Operário*, April 1, 1932, p. 26)

The poet José Gomes Ferreira (1900–1985), then a film chronicler, portrayed a series of vivid scenes: the neighbourhood cinemas, filled with shouting and whistling audiences, and the central theatres, where he sometimes witnessed ladies shedding tears, sobbing, or making picturesque remarks. However, on other occasions, he lamented that "the coughing, the heat, the giggling (...), the chatter in the boxes — everything ruins the film, stifles it, and prevents it from fulfilling its duty to make people laugh or to evoke feelings of emotion or tenderness" (*Kino*, January 22, 1931)[1].

It is worth noting that this active audience, as described in most accounts, engages in a manner distinct from theatre audiences of the mid-1800s. Their response is not marked by inattentiveness to symbolic forms; instead, they actively stimulate them: they

[1] Excerpt from the chronicle, reproduced in Borges and Sena (2000, p. 66).

cheer and applaud the heroes, weep at romantic scenes, and comment on the actors' appearances. Even imitating hairstyles and poses reflects an expanded engagement with mediated experiences.

The press highlights distant and fantastical stories, such as Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Moon*, underscoring the spectator's symbolic experience, who "is anxious about the fate of those who are leaving; awaits the moment of departure with impatience and anguish. And suffers the uncertainty of success, the painful moments at the start, the torture of breathlessness — experiencing every state of mind" (*O Cinema do Operário*, November 28, 1931, p. 43). The intensity of this symbolic engagement requires the erasure of all external distractions. Gomes Ferreira admits making a conscious effort to forget the presence of others in the cinema and even pens a "Crónica Contra o Público" (Chronicle Against the Public):

> they move in their chairs. They yawn impatiently. They laugh. They make rude jokes (...). I always feel like getting up and shouting: Hey, you fools! What are you doing here? Did you come on purpose to spoil my evening? Then I'd really appreciate it if you'd leave. Leave me alone! Leave me alone in the middle of the stalls. (*Imagem*, October 31, 1933, p. 19)[2]

Distinct from the old rituals of collective communion that transport participants beyond space and time, the modern pursuit of ecstatic experience unfolds in the encounter between the individual and symbolic objects. This quest is embedded in a culture of display typical of the symbolic economy of capitalism — a dynamic that, from the mid-1800s onward, situates theatres increasingly within the commercial hubs of cities (Butsch, 2000). Thomas Mann illustrates this transformation when Felix Krull "stands dazzled in the unearthly light that spills across the pavement from music halls and vaudeville houses" and delights in how "stores, bazaars, salons, that market places (...) do not stingily hide their treasures indoors, but shower them forth in glittering profusion" (Mann, 1954/2003, p. 88).

5. Final Discussion

Just as when you listen attentively to a story being told, theatre must also be viewed as a mediated experience, one that sometimes allows the audience to transcend the present time and space. It represents a facet of the processes of symbolic mediation of experience, while cinema serves as a mediatisation of that same experience, using technical and institutional means established as media.

However, as we observe that some of the key trends in the mediatisation of cinema at the dawn of the 20th century are a continuation, rather than a rupture, from those that had already transformed theatrical performance in the preceding decades, we recognise that the characteristics of this process of the mediatisation of experience do not lie solely in the new technological aspect introduced by films. Instead, they point to a broader

[2] Chronicle signed under the pseudonym Caçador de Imagens.

movement that emphasises symbolic forms for both theatre and cinema audiences, cultivating a more individualised connection with its members.

Theatre, which in the second half of the 19th century shifted from a predominantly immediate experience to an essentially mediated one, transitioned from a focus on the situational dimension of sociability to a greater emphasis on the symbolic dimension of the performance. This transformation was mirrored by cinema, which gradually dissuaded a collective, participatory audience. While various technologies — such as gas lighting, electricity, and sound films — played a role in domesticating and fragmenting audiences, the core of this shift lies in the changing contexts and norms within theatres. At its heart, this transformation was driven by the attention economy that capitalism cultivated during the industrial age.

While Thompson (1995) argues that the media in modernity facilitate a "de-sequestration" of experience by detaching it from the constraints of time and place, the reality is that the transformations in the audience's experience in both theatre and cinema correspond to the sequestration of their experience at the symbolic level. The situational experience of the audience was progressively diminished, with various mechanisms implemented to prevent movement, direct eye contact, and conversation. This process aimed to extract the audience from the present moment, guiding them towards the monopolisation of a psychic, disembodied experience. Cinema, with its technical power of a new order *combined with* the creation of a specific exhibition context, enhanced the capacity for symbolic transport that Benjamin (1936/2012) described in relation to the listener's imagination. However, it is misleading to assume that this type of experience was primarily created by the technical mediation of the film itself.

Thus, the concept of "mediatisation" can be theoretically examined based on this historical process, specifically: (a) in its common association with the idea of transformation; (b) in attributing causality to technological factors; and (c) from a tendentially media-centric viewpoint.

(a) The tendency to regard mediatisation as an explanatory theory of social change (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Lundby, 2014) risks attributing the media's involvement solely to transformations, providing an epistemological lens that distorts its role in specific historical moments when the significance of the rise of new media is more about consolidating processes already established in other forms. The danger in these cases is that the concept emphasises changes that appear newer but are not necessarily more meaningful. The case discussed here is part of a gradual emergence of symbolic mediation forms, which align with a long-term movement tied to the control of emotions within a more stable and programmable everyday life — a process Norbert Elias (1976/2006) referred to as a civilising process. This movement also has another side, which involves the search for substitutes for what is missing in daily life. The demand for vicarious emotional experiences, which in the bourgeoisie is closely tied to the culture of self-mastery over emotions, leads to the institutionalisation of social spaces where such emotions are exercised in a controlled and introverted manner. The theatre initially, and later the cinema, became these spaces, as the representational and interactive logics of both aristocratic and popular audiences were repressed. As this process unfolds in the theatre, it

becomes evident that cinema's significant contribution is not a transformation in a new direction but rather a reinforcement and deepening of the symbolic process of making the operations that mediate experience present.

(b) Even when new media play a determining role in social transformations, they may already be intentional responses to social needs, economic dynamics, and cultural values requiring compatible technological devices. New technical mediations are not necessarily the origin of change but should be understood as products of their historical context, functioning simultaneously as both incentives and responses within broader social transformations (Williams, 2003). It would be unproductive to try to determine whether cinema was a decisive *factor* in deepening the mediated experience or whether socio-economic forces found a technological *outlet* in moving images, directing them towards the specific conditions of the darkened room with its silent audience. The key is to see the technical-cultural binomial as an integral part of a process that intensifies the symbolic dimension of experience, which, once set in motion, encompasses factors that are deeply intertwined. One essential condition for this is to avoid treating technological change as an epistemological a priori. Although it may be tempting to use the emergence of a new medium as a starting point — because it provides easily identifiable material evidence — this can lead to an oversimplification. To consider cinema in isolation and without reference to the transformations of theatre in the 19th century would prevent us from fully grasping the extent of the dynamics of change within which the mediatisation of experience through film is embedded.

(c) Regarding human experience, the concept of "mediatisation" becomes restrictive if it focuses solely on mediation enabled by technology. Defining experience based exclusively on this criterion creates a direct-versus-mediated dichotomy rooted in a prosthetic view of technology. This perspective, emerging in the 19th century, frames technology as the ultimate extension of human capability (Martins, 1996). The historical significance of technically mediated experiences risks being misunderstood if they are isolated from their interactions with direct experiences, including their situational aspects, which remain intrinsic to mediated experiences. Furthermore, these experiences should be recognised as a type of symbolic interaction among many, with the continuous transcendence of the here and now occurring beyond or in conjunction with technical media.

The transformative nuances of theatre and cinema audience experiences do not undermine the relevance of the concept of mediatisation but challenge its implied opposition between direct and technologically mediated experiences. They also contest the notion that technical media exert historical overdetermination. Limiting mediations of experience to technological use reflects cultural reductionism and an epistemology biased by the common sense of our time (even when applied retrospectively).

Translation: Anabela Delgado

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Biographical Note

José Ricardo Carvalheiro holds a PhD in Communication Sciences and serves as an associate professor at the University of Beira Interior, where he is also a researcher at LabCom. He is the director of the master's programme in Journalism at the University of Beira Interior. His primary research interests include the history of media and audiences, cultural identities, and journalism studies.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3917-5230

Email: jose.carvalheiro@labcom.ubi.pt

Address: Universidade da Beira Interior, Departamento de Comunicação, Filosofia e Política – Rua Marquês d'Ávila e Bolama, 6201-001 Covilhã

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